THE MODERNIST IN CHURCH MUSIC

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In the second verse of the One Hundredth Psalm, we find these words: "Come before his presence with singing."

The author of this Psalm was a singer and poet; and singers and poets, together with preachers and painters, sculptors and architects, scientists and musicians, are among the builders of the world. They are among the creative artists who work with their own materials. The rest are artisans who work with materials given them by others.

A creative artist at his best is a prophet, and God speaks through His prophets. The creative artist is a man of today; that is why he is so often misunderstood. Most of us are able to understand only in terms of the experiences of our teachers, that is, in terms of yesterday. The creative artist is impatient with the terms of yesterday, and he speaks to us only in terms of his own experience. He is always a step or two ahead of us. He reveals to man his best and inner self, where we are told the Kingdom of Heaven is to be found.

The Psalmist has given us poetry of such singing quality that music added to it seems redundant, and yet we know that music enhances the beauty of even the most perfect poetry. The Psalms have been the greatest hymns of the ages. The records tell us that Jesus and some of the disciples sang a hymn together in the Garden on the Mount of Olives; it is almost certain that that hymn was one of the Psalms, and very probably it was sung to one of the Plainsong tunes that is in use today.

Plainsong, which is used somewhat in the Anglican Church, is used authoritatively in the Church of Rome, but it is rarely sung in its early pure, simple form. A few years ago, Pope Pius X issued a Bull called the "Motu Proprio." While this was done in perfectly good faith, the Roman Church made one of the greatest retrograde movements in her history. The element of growth was ruled out of the music of the Mass. With a stroke of the pen, she acknowledged her lack of faith in man who, according to St. Paul, is on his way to attain "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Musicians who accept Plainsong for use in the Church to the exclusion of other music, admit the superiority of ages long past and also admit the fact that they are on the losing side, by refusing the artistic challenge of today, which demands that we hear in our own idiom the wonderful voices of Creation.

After the Dark Ages, the western world began to feel growing pains in all of its members. Men began to think and live complexly, and workers in all expression of art grew up to satisfy the wants of nations. This period, covering several centuries, we call the Renaissance.

Music responded to the general trend and, instead of Plainsong, which consists of a single melodic line, we find the use of polyphony. This polyphonic or many-voiced music-- soprano, alto, tenor, and bass-- reached its apex in the hands of Vittoria of Spain, Palestrina in Italy, Josquin des Pres and Orlando di Lasso in the Netherlands, and Purcell, Byrd, and Gibbons in England, to name but a few of the musical giants of those days. If we want to be on the safe and comfortable side of artistic opinion, we can admit that this was the Golden Age of Church music. The elements of the placid and impersonal and passionless are found there in all perfection.

But we who are gathered here are not content to live only on our inheritance. We refuse to think that the Golden Age is a thing of the past. We prefer rather to think that it is always in the making. We believe that "the moving finger writes and, having writ, moves on" but to express in more glowing terms our vital experiences as we mark the milestones of spiritual and artistic growth.

The music of the Victorians is under a fire of criticism these days, but we must remember that we have not yet given Time the opportunity to do its inexorable work of clearing out the bad. When Time will have done its work, I feel sure that there will be enough good left of the Victorian output to give it a very definite place in history.

One of the things which we inherit from the last century is its splendid contribution to hymnology. We cannot imagine the church without such glorious hymns as "Crown Him with Many Crowns," "The Church's One Foundation," or such heart-reaching ones as "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "Abide with Me," "Hark, Hark, My Soul," and scores more, which seem sometimes to contain the whole and very essence of our belief.

What is the future of Church music? It is without doubt in the hands of the so-called Modernist. And what is a Modernist? Is he, according to the popular idea, an iconoclast? No, indeed. A true Modernist is quite the opposite. He is a builder, who builds with the materials of today so that his work may be used tomorrow. He is the only creative artist. Those who think in terms of yesterday will forever hold the wrong opinion of the Modernist. The young people, not necessarily young in years but in mind, will understand him, and it is to the young that the artist will turn for support when it will be lacking elsewhere.

The Modernist of today becomes the classicist of tomorrow. He is the seer, the prophet, the sincere believer in himself, who can express himself only in terms of his own experience. The one who "plays safe," and who thinks and works only in terms of his predecessors, no matter how great his craftsmanship, has no claim whatsoever to creative artistry and never will have.

The Modernist, too, has an unfailing reverence for the work of the past and, in a way, makes himself personally responsible for carrying the ancient standards to still greater heights. When Jesus told Peter to venture out into the deep to make his catch, it was a lesson for us all. I believe that venturesomeness is the most vital quality in art, as well as in living; and it is this element of venturesomeness that is always in evidence in the work of the Modernist. If the Modernist were in need of authority to encourage him, other than his inner urge, he might well take as a slogan the first verse of the Ninety-eighth Psalm: "O sing unto the Lord a <u>new</u> song."

The real artist, the real Modernist, must be a disturber of the peace. He must trouble the waters of artistic indolence and complacency. The waters will calm themselves and remain calm until disturbed again by other standard-bearers. If we were never troubled into the acceptance of new ideas and developments, we should still be living in a world of primitives.

I think that all of us have the creative urge in some way or another. We should try to find that inner temple of the Holy Spirit, where the life-giving spark is generated. There is not a single person here who cannot at least generate some good will and understanding toward the artist. We should be able to see that all creative art is important, that the greatest and the least are of equal importance if each expresses himself in sincere and personal terms. We need never worry about the good and the bad. Time will always weed out the bad and leave the good as a contribution to the ages to come.

The Church owes the artist her protection, understanding, and encouragement. There should never be a service of importance without the touch of today in it. There should never be a church building erected without the signature of today on its walls. There is no danger of losing the priceless inheritance of the past, the Chruch will always cherish and use it. That would mean that the Church would be walking with the banners of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, followed by the great armies of souls who have gone before, those living today, and those as yet unborn, walking side by side in a great fourth-dimensional procession.